

## Executive Director's Statement

The opening song in *Hair*, the "American tribal love rock musical," heralds the age of Aquarius—a time of change. As the New York State Council on the Arts enters its second decade, its greatest challenge will be remaining responsive to the needs of a changing society in the throes of an aesthetic revolution. Concurrently, it faces the task of helping salvage some of New York's largest and most impressive arts organizations from bankruptcy. The dilemma of our established arts institutions—museums, opera companies, symphony orchestras—is more financially acute and no less significant to American society than the headline problems currently confronting churches and universities. New standards, new forms, new values are being demanded—and occasionally created. If New York's major arts institutions cannot resolve the questions that change will pose in the seventies, not only will they fail financially, but they may also become artistically irrelevant.

Money for the arts—where it comes from, who provides it, and why it is given—will have a great deal to do with the ability and desire of the State's most venerable arts organizations to be meaningful to contemporary American society. In the United States, money frequently assumes the characteristics of an alchemist's magical potion, and in the arts especially it is often seen as that critical ingredient which will miraculously absolve organizational chaos and artistic inadequacy. In reality, its sudden availability can compound chronic difficulties; but the lack of it can serve as a warning of subtle and far-reaching problems for which there is no quick or simple cure.

In 1970, the Metropolitan Opera, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Rochester Symphony face imminent bankruptcy; most of the museums in the State are not much more secure. The insistent question of whether the State's largest cultural institutions can survive has an urgency today that ten years ago was barely a consideration. Laurance Roberts, the Council's first executive director, recommended to Governor Rockefeller and the Legislature in 1960 that an initial appropriation of \$450,000 be spent to disseminate throughout the State the arts activities that were concentrated in a few metropolitan centers, most notably New York City. One wonders whether he would not have recommended a budget of twenty-five million dollars if he could have foreseen the financial crisis that confronts the arts today.

What is this desperate financial crunch all about? Why, when grass roots arts groups and theatre companies are springing up in profusion - have emerged in New York State in the past two years—should the most seemingly stable organizations be having such trouble?

In the past, although the artist has been the most active patron of the arts in the United States, the Internal Revenue Service has triggered the largest amount of cash. Tax benefits on contributions to non-profit organizations have firmly established the individual patron as the leader among contributors to the arts. The single wealthy, typically patrician, patron has been both a blessing and curse to artistic vitality in America. Established arts institutions in the United States would be non-existent without the relatively few wealthy men and women who have cared about the arts through the years in our puritanically unsympathetic society. The influence of these individuals on the institutions they have supported is overwhelming—but unfortunately not always healthy. The temptation to operate an orchestra, an opera company, or a museum as an elitist club is

a constant threat. The arrangement can and usually does lead to the artistically safe, the conservative, and the inoffensive. It also produces more interest in interpreting the works of another age than fostering the creativity of sounds and images consistent with a technological culture where the contemporary palette is electronic, and sound is as much physical as it is auditory. At their worst, the arts in traditional, established terms are very much an entertainment for Alexander Hamilton's "rich and well-born." The tradition is likely to be European more than American, and the focus more on status and escape than on illumination and challenge. Concert programs avoid expanding the literature of music at the risk of offending patrons. Museum exhibitions suffer from a preoccupation with installation and fashion rather than the visual language of man.

Thin rays of hope for funds from other sources peer fleetingly through the maze of governmental priorities and the euphemistic delusion of "corporate self-enlightenment." The corporate dollar is a particularly difficult one for an arts institution to obtain. Most of the time, such contributions are made specifically for presentations or events that provide advertising exposure for the corporation spending the money. Despite the formation of groups like the Business Committee for the Arts, the arts receive less than four cents of the corporate philanthropic dollar-and that dollar itself is only one-fifth of what it could be were corporations to take full advantage of charitable contributions under current tax provisions. There is also a tendency on the part of the business community to superimpose its own financial and organizational standards on the arts. The emphasis is more on the management of money than the quality of artistic accomplishment.

Despite some early specters of political censorship and ultimate control, public support offers the most immediate relief for the financial future of the arts. In the ten-year experience of the New York State Council on the Arts the most notable examples of political favoritism have been precipitated by arts organizations themselves and not by politicians. Instead, the most pernicious aspect of government support of the arts is bureaucracy.

Upon occasion, bureaucratic delays in disbursing Council funds through the labyrinth of procedures in Albany have seriously jeopardized the stability of small groups. Bureaucracy also has a mindless inflexibility that forces arts institutions to conform to its arbitrary requirements rather than adapting its procedures to accommodate the needs of the arts. The result can have an altogether deadening effect on structure and purpose. Many of the Title III grants of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, for example, shifted the interests of arts organizations toward a primary concern for education rather than the arts. At the end of three years, when Title III money was no longer available, the groups had lost their identity and, in some cases, the unique point of view that made their work valid.

The healthiest aspect of government support of anything is the insistence with which it must consider the public. It is this quality that may ultimately hold the greatest promise for resolving such curious disparities as that between the phenomenon of Woodstock and the public apathy toward the troubles of the Metropolitan Opera. In twenty-five words or less, public money requires that an arts organization perform a service for the public. This incontrovertible measure of who gets how much and for what forces arts organizations to think purely and simply in terms of human

beings. The demand it imposes on an orchestra or a museum is different from the one which an individual patron might make, but so far the result has not been a lowering of standards as some have argued.

Public money means that museums, symphony orchestras, opera companies will have to perform more than a curatorial function for a few connoisseurs, a handful of patrons, and the select "members of the club." Museums will have to be more involved in the concerns of their immediate communities and the aesthetics of our total environment. Performing arts companies will have to be contemporary for a much larger segment of society—to the benefit of both artist and audience since neither can attain true excellence without the involvement and commitment of the other. Once again, the artist has already responded to a new direction and a new demand for the arts in America. Large arts organizations may compromise artistic focus in the dilemma of financial crisis, but street theatre, public sculpture, electronic sound, ghetto films, acid rock, jazz, folk and country western, environmental happenings, and guerrilla plays are already profoundly involved in the ethical and aesthetic yearnings of America.

Most of the groups performing for street audiences are without legal framework, stability, and organization; they constantly pose an awkward problem for the tax-conscious patron. The technical polish of their work is limited when it exists at all, but the content is powerful, rich, and compelling. It is also uniquely American. When established arts institutions can involve audiences to the same extent as these grass roots companies, the arts will not only have the constituency they need for increased public funds, but they will be able to recognize the alchemy of money for what it is—and begin to repossess the elusive yet essential magic of human communication that is the essence of art.

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